

# The Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza and ACCIONA launch the *Art and Sustainability* route



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Joaquín Mollinedo, ACCIONA's director general of Institutional Relations, Sustainability and Brand, Evelio Acevedo, the managing director of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, and Ana Moreno, head of the museum's Education Department, have presented *Art and Sustainability*.

This new route around masterpieces from the Thyssen's permanent collection aims to encourage sustainable thinking and a reflection on the need for a balanced form of progress that respects the environment and is responsible in terms of its impact on society.

For Mollinedo: "This new route around the Museo Thyssen encourages a reflection on the three aspects – economic, social and environmental – of sustainability through the delicate and penetrating gaze of painters." He added: "At ACCIONA we believe that sustainability is essential to our mission as a company. This new route, *Art and Sustainability*, brings us closer to society, setting out the major challenges that sustainability implies."

For Evelio Acevedo: "A museum is based, among other things, on sustainability, on ensuring, for example, that a work of art from the 14<sup>th</sup> century is presented to the public in the optimum conditions and retaining its essence over the centuries. For this reason, a route like the present one makes complete sense for a museum such as ours."

The choice of works for inclusion in this route has been made on the basis of an aesthetic experience that relates art and sustainable development in terms of ecology, the economy and society, and the chosen paintings are reinterpreted in a context that generates empathy with the environment and with sustainability. This is not environmental art but rather outstanding works from the history of art, which provide the starting point for engaging in a historical reflection on the relations between culture, society and sustainable development.

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The route begins with ***Pastoral Landscape with the Flight into Egypt*** (1663) by Claude Lorrain, one of the earliest painters in the history of art to employ landscape as an independent genre. Claude's idealised gaze on nature now suggests a harmonious relationship with culture, an encounter that can be read as living in nature and not from it, requiring societies to be committed to the protection of the heritage and the preservation of the environment in order to halt climate change.



***The Grand Canal from San Vio, Venice*** (ca.1723-1724) by Canaletto is an example of the *vedute* or urban views that were so popular with the travellers and art lovers who made the lengthy trip through France and Italy known as the Grand Tour in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the present day tourism is the motor of Venice's prosperity and has brought short-term benefits to the local economy but it is also having a negative effect on the conservation of its cultural heritage.

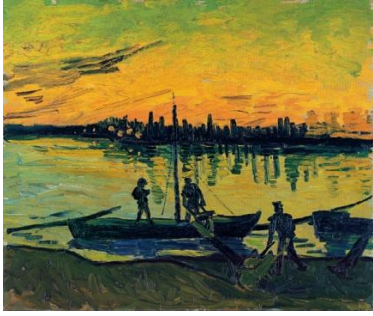
***Winter Landscape*** (ca.1670) by Jacob Isaacksz. van Ruisdael includes two contrasting energy sources which contributed to the economic development of the Low Countries: turf, a cheap fossil fuel that was used to supply the country's growing cities, and windmills, a clean and unlimited energy source. This context may help us to reflect on the type of economy that we should be adopting in order not to exhaust the energy sources that the planet offers us.



The landscapes of the American painter John Frederick Kensett depict comfortable, peaceful places for human beings to live. In ***Lake George*** (ca.1860) Kensett conveys the tranquillity, silence and serenity of this natural location, which would subsequently become a tourist destination with the arrival of the railway. Thanks to landscape painters like Kensett, the United States government took steps to protect natural landscapes and a few years later established the country's first national park. This context encourages us to think about the close relationship between aesthetic awareness and a conservationist spirit with regard to unique, irreplaceable ecosystems.

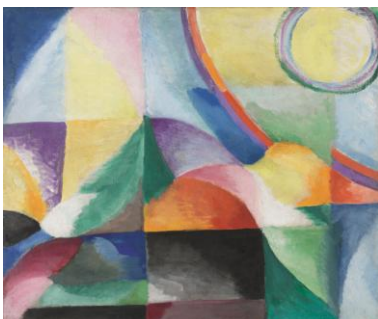
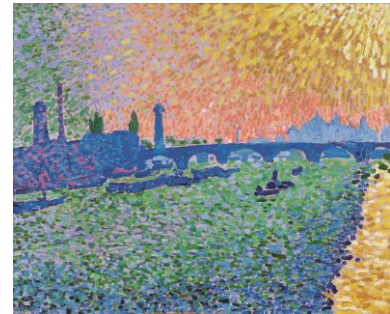
Rather than a relationship of exploitation and control over the environment, German Romanticism showed man as having a contemplative attitude towards nature. Landscape became the quintessential Romantic genre, embodying all the aesthetic innovations of the time and was as such the ideal mode of visual expression for conveying artists' personal feelings. Painters made contact with nature, leaving their studios in order to work from life. Although descriptive, Caspar David Friedrich's views aimed to go beyond topographical information, as in ***Easter Morning*** (ca.1828-35), a work he imbued with a symbolic content that connects with the viewer.





In *The Stevedores in Arles* (1888) Vincent van Gogh captured the vibrations of the evening light on the Rhone and the labour of the stevedores unloading coal. The life of the French city of Arles has always had close links with the use of water from its river, the only one that connects the Mediterranean with the north of Europe. In the present day the Rhone is an important source of renewable energy thanks to the dams built along its banks which produce 20% of France's hydroelectric power. The management of the river now aims to achieve a balance between development and the physical and ecological protection of water.

Industrial development and the transformation of cities provoked an equal degree of rejection and fascination among modern artists, and London was one of the most representative cases: the largest city in the world and the leading force behind Europe's industrial and economic development. In his view of *Waterloo Bridge* (1906) André Derain combines an urban and an industrial view which includes both historic buildings and factories, giving them the same importance and creating a single outline that separates the natural elements – the sky and water - in the landscape. Nonetheless, the sun casts its powerful beams over the city, as if Derain had wished to paint both a positive and apocalyptic vision of London and of the modern city.



*Simultaneous Contrasts* (1913) by Sonia Delaunay can be used to refer to the difficulties that women still experience today in being acknowledged as key agents in the development of our societies. In order to achieve sustainable development it is both essential and fundamental that we acknowledge women's hidden work over the centuries in social, financial and political terms. This avant-garde artist experimented with an extremely wide range of techniques and supports and together with her husband, Robert Delaunay, invented Orphism and Simultaneism. She was, however, relegated to a secondary plane due to her exclusive devotion to design and the applied arts, although in recent years the multifaceted nature of her career has been reassessed and fully recognised.

Together with Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova invented Rayonism, a pictorial style based on the study of the expansion of light emanating from different sources. As in *The Forest* (1913), a battery of rays of light emerging in all directions allows for both the subject and setting to be seen and the viewer to penetrate the density of this seemingly abstract forest. Much of Goncharova's work focused on the rural world from where her family originated. The aesthetic of this painting is close to Russian *lubki*, coloured woodcut illustrations of popular tales that decorated the peasants' homes. The painting's technique and its evocation of the forest thus





locate us in that ecosystem; the planet's lung, which is threatened by deforestation today.



In *Merzbild Kijkduin* (1923) Kurt Schwitters retrieves and combines objects thrown away for being no longer useful or having served their purpose, reusing them and giving them a new existence. This act of rebellion against the traditional mode of artistic creation could today be interpreted as a form of recycling. Rather than creating from nothing, the Dada artist reused and recycled cast-off materials, transforming them into art. From our present-day perspective Schwitters' work encourages a reflection on how to reduce consumption and on the life cycles of material goods. In opposition to the "use and throw away" philosophy, Schwitters

collected thrown-away items that were no longer useful and transformed them into artistic resources.

A nomadic and cosmopolitan artist, Mark Tobey was a pioneer of abstract art in America and in the study of oriental calligraphy and ink drawing. His delicate, linear pictorial style derived both from first-hand observation and from Surrealist automatism and oriental mysticism. In *Earth Rhythms* (1961) the earthy tones, dotted with light touches of reds, blues and purples, interlink through a series of floating, calligraphic white lines to create the unique spatial representation of Tobey's cosmos. The artist's meditative study of nature transcends traditional western contemplation and penetrates the biological rhythms. In a metaphorical manner the universality of Tobey's themes make his painting the perfect pretext for referring to the current urgent necessity to listen to the Earth's rhythms and to respect the planet's limits in order to ensure the sustainability of future generations.



Finally, the presence in the collection of a work by an Afro-American artist provides an opportunity to consider social equality and the recognition of other cultures within the account of western art, both of which are essential elements for sustainable development. Born into a prosperous Afro-American family, Romare Bearden played an active role in the Harlem cultural renaissance from the 1920s and also in the black community's civil rights struggles. He attended

night school with the German painter George Grosz at the legendary Art Students League and his first works are caricatures that denounce racial segregation in the United States. *Sunday after Sermon* (1969) is a large collage which combines newspaper and magazine cuttings with pieces of wallpaper. In it, elements from western culture intentionally and harmoniously coexist with social practices of the Afro-American community in New York.